An In-Depth Study of 'Triptych', from Seamus Heaney's *Field Work*

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This paper focuses critical attention on 'Triptych', the sequence of three poems in Seamus Heaney's 1979 collection *Field Work*. The sequence directly follows the opening poem 'Oysters', and by virtue of position alone commands attention. It is the first of a number of poems in the collection to address the conflict in Northern Ireland, and can be seen as a kind of public poetry, very different in tone, theme and style from early Heaney. This exploration derives from attempts to provide satisfactory answers to questions concerning elements within the sequence which resist smooth interpretation.

My method of approach is largely chronological, in the sense that I go through the poems starting at the beginning and plough through to the end, stanza by stanza, sometimes line by line, attempting to guide the reader toward an understanding of the poem derived from apparent textual evidence. Early on, however, I do state what I think the poetic sequence is designed to be, and this argument informs my interpretation throughout. Yet, at every point, I provide what I consider a coherent rationale and logic for my critical opinions. I would certainly welcome debate on each and every point. The conclusions I have come to in regard to this poetic sequence, are, at times, negative, but not exclusively so. I have looked at this poetic sequence up close and

found it to be problematic in a number of areas. The closeness of my examination, however, has allowed me to tease out much of the richness of the poems, leading, I would hope, to some greater awareness of the breadth and the ambition that clearly went into the creation of 'Triptych'.

After a Killing

This poem, and the whole poetic sequence, in common with a few significant others in *Field Work*, is very serious in tone and in matter. It concerns the 'Troubles', the roughly thirty year period of civil strife and deadly conflict centred in Northern Ireland, beginning at the end of the sixties. The killing which apparently inspired it, was retrospectively assigned (there are no specifics in the poem, and no notes) to that of the British Ambassador to Ireland, Christopher Ewart-Biggs, blown up in a bomb planted by the Provisional IRA in July 1976. Each poem of the sequence is structured identically: five stanzas of four unrhymed lines. This is the opening stanza:

> There they were, as if our memory hatched them,
> As if the unquiet founders walked again:
> Two young men with rifles on the hill,
> Profane and bracing as their instruments.

The men holding rifles are probably overseers: Heaney heard a report of such.(1) The likelihood that this is an IRA action and that the victim was some high-level British official comes via the linking of the two young men carrying rifles with 'the unquiet founders'. This can be taken to refer to the men of the 1916 Easter Rising, and to people like Michael Collins, who masterminded a campaign of killings of several high-

ranking police and officials of his time, as part of a violent resistance to Britain's long-standing rule over Ireland. The adjective 'unquiet' could be taken to refer to the fact that they resorted to violence, with a further sense that doing so was not an easy option for them. The second and third stanzas appear to express feelings of desolation on the part of the poet, presumably as a direct consequence of this killing, while the last two present a change of scene, and of feeling, offering a contrastive note of hopefulness, perhaps.

The poetic sequence as a whole can be read as expiatory. In the second poem, entitled 'Sibyl', 'fouled magma' may be taken as a symbolic image of moral or spiritual corruption (of Irish society, embroiled in conflict), and in the final piece, the poet becomes 'penitential' and wishes to 'pray at the water's edge'. This reading tallies with Heaney's comments on the inspiration for the sequence: 'It wasn't so much personal grief as shock at the assassination that knocked me and everybody else sideways. Killing an ambassador was more like the breaking of an ancient taboo… in my old-fashioned way, I thought the honour of the Irish nation had been compromised by the killing…'[(2)] This statement echoes the reaction of the Irish Prime Minister of the time, Liam Cosgrave, whose government was left reeling by the incident. Taoiseach Cosgrave stated: 'This atrocity fills all decent Irish people with a sense of shame.'[(3)]

The first stanza, however, does not express moral outrage explicitly: there is no direct statement, or pointed implication, that this was a heinous assassination. Plus, it is called a 'killing', not a 'murder'. Rather, in the first stanza, the IRA men, who oversee the killing itself, are described in a manner which sounds almost quite innocent: 'Two young men' on a hill -not 'two shady figures', for example. Linking them to the founders of the Irish state, together with the phrase 'our

memory'-signifying collective Catholic Irish consciousness- appears to afford them a measure of validity and acceptance. The rifles they hold are re-packaged as 'instruments', a transformation which at the very least erodes the sense of menace; it may even suggest that they are in fact legitimate hunters. Furthermore, the coupling of the adjectives 'profane' and 'bracing' tends to blur the focus of how the reader is meant to see these 'two young men' -in a negative light, 'profane', or a positive one, 'bracing'? In aggregate, these various elements in the opening stanza present something of a challenge to the reader in terms of precisely how to interpret the IRA action.

Neil Corcoran suggests the adjectives, 'profane' and 'bracing', 'work against each other in a self-cancelling way'. He also picks up on the suggestion that, along with the transformation of 'rifles' into 'instruments' that the poet is prey to two conflicting attitudes:

> 'Despite what appear, then, the poem's pacific gestures at its close [the final two stanzas], there is a glamour and "quickening" inherent in these images at its opening which attach it -almost, as it were, despite itself- to some of the persistent tropes and tones of republican rhetoric.'(4)

Andrew Murphy's view delivers a plainer assessment of the situation: 'The [opening] stanza is curiously ambiguous.'(5) He finds the coupling of these adjectives, together with the description of the rifles as 'instruments', difficult to resolve in the manner of clear interpretation:

> 'It is not clear, then, whether Heaney feels that the community is in sympathy with these militants, nor is it clear whether he feels that there is a clear line of continuity between earlier armed struggles

> and the violent campaign being pursued in contemporary Ireland.'(6)

Murphy talks of Heaney's 'ambivalence', and sees it as running through the entire sequence of three poems. The poet was prey to the same conflicted sensibility as many a Northern Catholic (but by no means all), despising IRA violence, and yet painfully aware of the dysfunctional political and historical situation which had given birth to the organization, not to mention the other players in the conflict. Evidence of Heaney's ambivalence -his capacity to harbour contradictory feelings or attitudes in relation to the conflict- is provided by Murphy's quotation of comments which Heaney made in his Nobel acceptance speech, reproduced here:

> 'I remember… shocking myself with a thought I had about [a] friend who was imprisoned in the seventies upon suspicion of having been involved with a political murder: I shocked myself by thinking that even if he were guilty, he might still perhaps be helping the future to be born, breaking the repressive forms and liberating new potential in the only way that worked, that is to say the violent way -which therefore became, by extension, the right way.'(7)

While Heaney describes this feeling as fleeting -'it was only a moment'-, it is clear that he was capable of seeing the rationale behind political violence while at the same time feeling repulsed by it. Such ambivalence was, for many Northern Catholics, a familiar state of mind during the Troubles. This opening stanza, then, appears to express something of that ambivalence. As such, it cannot be taken as a forthright condemnation of the killing itself.

In turn, if we take the two immediately following stanzas to be relating the poet's subsequent -in the sense of cause and effect- feelings of desolation, this view of the opening stanza creates a problem of logic for the rest of the poem: how can the poet be shocked and desolated by an act about which he feels ambivalent? Before we discuss this in more depth, it will be necessary to establish that the following stanzas do indeed express something close to despair.

Such a sense, of desolation and near despair, is etched, I believe, into the image, in stanza two, of dwelling 'among ourselves/ In rain and scoured light and wind-dried stones.' The features of the Irish landscape mentioned here provide no protection and no comfort from the harsh elements. The following line, 'Basalt, blood, water, headstones, leeches', further emphasizes the sense of comfortlessness. The line's conspicuous lack of grammar can be interpreted as signaling a lack of discourse in Ireland at this time, or as evidence of a breakdown of language and discourse, a situation which, in turn, can nurture violence. This idea is given explicit utterance at the end of the second poem in the sequence: 'Our island is full of comfortless noises.'(8) The noises (perhaps the 'noises' of bombings, of shootings, or the 'noises' of grievances and even failed attempts at dialogue) do not cohere. They do not harmonize, or make rational sense, just as the words in that line beginning with 'Basalt' do not cohere, or make rational sense.

The words 'blood', 'headstones' (gravestones) and, to an extent, 'leeches' (parasites), may speak for themselves in expressing aspects of the conflict, but the first word in the line requires some extra attention. Basalt is a fine-grained hard volcanic rock, extensive in Northern Ireland, and particularly the Antrim Plateau, which takes in Heaney's home ground of Derry. It is certainly a feature of the landscape at Dunseverick, mentioned in the third stanza, as that is part of the scenic

Causeway Walk. The Giant's Causeway, a World Heritage Site since 1986, was formed by volcanic activity around sixty million years ago and is a huge site of around 40,000 basalt rock forms. This has relevance for the second poem 'Sibyl', with its image of 'fouled magma'. Precisely what these references mean in tandem is not made explicit, but surely they invoke the particular location of the North of Ireland, and a sense of time, albeit time immemorial. Furthermore, the image of magma, and volcanic activity, suggests a state of flux just below the surface, which of course has metaphoric resonance with the state of society in the North of Ireland at the height of the Troubles. The 'basalt' reference, taken together with the 'magma' reference in the second poem, can be read as perhaps signaling the idea of age-old enmities that are hard to overturn, wherein the apparent calm of any given day might be shattered by the sudden rising to the surface of explosive forces.

The problem with all this desolation, however, is that it seems to derive from reaction to a political killing which is alluded to without any clear sense of disgust; rather, the killing is alluded to with apparent ambivalence. The reader may wonder, then, why the poet might feel as depressed as he seems to be. To recap, the tone of the opening stanza is not clearly condemnatory because (a) it portrays the IRA in a manner which links them to the historically-validated 'unquiet founders' and (b) it employs language which betokens something close to acceptance and/or even approbation ('two young men', 'bracing', 'instruments'). Therefore, it is difficult to comprehend the subsequent desolation on the part of the poet.

Yet, Heaney is using this sequence of three poems to expiate the crime, so to speak, which was the killing of a high-ranking British official. As his later comments make clear, this act was shocking to him, that he 'thought the honour of the Irish nation had been compromised by

the killing'. It follows then that this poetic sequence is an opportunity to make poetic amends for Irish misdeeds. For this reason, we can call 'Triptych' a public poem, because it is clearly making a public declaration. Therefore, perhaps despite himself, despite his own honest ambivalence concerning how he himself views the violence of the IRA, Heaney casts his poetic self into the throes of desolation and near despair in stanzas two and three.

The question which opens stanza two, 'Who's sorry for our trouble?' recalls 'Mid-Term Break', from *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), and the scene in which visitors to the house of the Heaney family, who have just lost their four year old in a car accident, express their sympathy: '…I was embarrassed / By old men standing up to shake my hand / And tell me they were "sorry for my trouble"'. It is indeed a standard utterance in Ireland at times of grief. By making it into a question, however, Heaney is suggesting that our Irish troubles are to be suffered by our Irish selves. He is raising the old problem of neglect of Ireland's misery by the British. This notion of neglect is most clearly linked in history to the harsh economic policy of 'laissez-faire' by which the British were able to justify non-intervention in Ireland during the Great Famine of 1845-49. History was seen to repeat itself during the middle of the twentieth century wherein a creeping inequality within Northern Ireland was allowed to go unchecked. This inequality, in which Protestants tended to receive preferential treatment over Catholics in employment and housing, for example, evolved over generations, becoming institutional. This issue, then, led to the late sixties civil rights marches across Northern Ireland, undertaken mostly, of course, by Catholics who felt themselves to be disenfranchised by the very state. One such event makes an appearance in the poet's memory at the very end of the final poem, with the 'helicopter shadowing our

march at Newry.' There is a very clear link, then, between the pointed question, 'Who's sorry for our trouble?', and the mention of the civil rights marches at the end of the poetic sequence. The issue raised by this question is part of the framing of the entire sequence, and is certainly designed to resonate beyond the confines of the poem itself.

The timing and the appropriateness of the question within this poem, however, might raise its own question. It hardly seems the best moment to mention British neglect, and 'our trouble', following as it does the killing of a high-ranking British official. The Troubles did not immediately kick-start any great engagement by the British government with the Irish problem, but it certainly did get their attention. Ewart-Biggs was killed in Dublin, and violence had claimed lives across the water, too, with the Guildford and Birmingham pub bombings. The violent conflict was not limited to the small geographical area of the six counties of Ulster which make up the state of Northern Ireland, as the question appears to imply. Writing in 1982, critic Tony Curtis states that 'deaths in Ireland barely nudge their way onto the front pages of the British newspapers now', but surely they did, and it wasn't only deaths in Ireland.(9) The 1974 Birmingham pub bombings, in which twenty one civilians died and nearly two hundred were injured, changed everything. Incidents such as these engendered intense and widespread anti-Irish sentiment, which would last for years. Neglect continued in the sense that nothing was done to address the core issues, but the question in Heaney's poem, 'Who's sorry for our trouble?', coming in the midst of all this arguably reads as ill-timed and off-kilter. The British were incensed by the Irish, and not in any frame of mind to be sorry for them. The killing of Ewart-Biggs was shocking for the British, too.(10)

The phrase 'neuter original loneliness', in stanza three, appears to suggest some time which pre-exists the current period in which no-one

is neutral. Such a time did exist, but it would have been eons previous, when the island of Ireland was populated by only Gaelic people, before the arrival of the English.(11) Once the English came, neutrality on the question of the right of the English to be in Ireland and to control Ireland vanished: you either agreed or disagreed.(12) The image of the poet thinking of 'small-eyed survivor flowers/ The pined-for, unmolested orchid' suggests a psychological response to the present situation in Ireland akin to trauma. It is not a response which deals with the complexities of the situation, rather, it could be argued, the poet appears to be running away from the realities, seeking out some location, some thing, any thing, even a flower, which can be said to be unrelated to the present internecine strife. The place names are brought in to suggest that the poet has looked throughout the entire island of Ireland, as Brandon is situated in Kerry, in the extreme south west, and Dunseverick, in Antrim, in the extreme north. He has looked throughout the entire island for something which is 'neuter' or 'unmolested', something beautiful perhaps, as the orchid is a flower famed for its delicate and ornate beauty. Along with the emergence of penitential feelings in the third poem, it would seem that the poet's response to Republican political violence, then, is to (a) look away from it and toward something which might provide aesthetic comfort, (b) to simply curl up, and become 'foetal', as we see in the third poem, or (c) again from the third poem, to go barefoot and ask for forgiveness -and, given the particular context of this poetic sequence, this would mean asking for forgiveness from the British (because 'I thought the honour of the Irish people had been compromised by the killing'). This approach undermines whatever trace of ambivalence the poet appeared to possess at the opening of the poetic sequence, as a Northern Irish Catholic, a quasi-Republican-leaning individual, labouring under a highly dysfunctional political system.

The final two stanzas of the poem appear to provide some contrastive relief. Heaney gets cinematic, changing the scene and the feeling very dramatically. The 'pined-for, unmolested orchid' appears to have been found, although its actual form is a little different. The meaning of 'The heart lifts' presumably means that the feeling of desolation and despair has been escaped from, and what has brought about this transformation is engagement with a kind of Edenic Ireland, and one that is, it would seem, as apolitical as is possible. The 'stone house by a pier' and the 'Broad window light' seem almost drafted out of a Liam Blake 'Real Ireland' calendar. There is nothing wrong with that, of course, because Ireland does have its beauty, and it existed even in the midst of the most terrible atrocities suffered over the years. These two stanzas, whatever else they do, certainly provide a welcome relief and a feeling of hope after all the seriousness of the preceding stanzas.

The scene and action in these two stanzas may be derived from the everyday life of the poet, who, since 1972, had left warring Belfast and taken up residence in a cottage in Glanmore, Wicklow (in the Republic of Ireland) with his family. As Curtis explained: 'The Heaney's [sic] have a stone house on the coast; the fruits of the land and sea are at hand.'(13) Yet, it may also be impressionistic. There is something dream-like about this scene, as though, as has been noted by others, in anticipation of the second poem, 'Sibyl', which eschews realism completely.

And today a girl walks in home to us
Carrying a basket full of new potatoes,
Three tight green cabbages, and carrots
With the tops and mould still fresh on them.

Indeed, from a realistic point of view, the basket might seem actually a little heavy, puncturing the airiness of the girl's entry. Furthermore, there is the realistic, and admittedly prosaic problem, of the visibility of the potatoes, under all the cabbages and carrots. Yet, seen as I believe the scene is supposed to be taken, as impressionistic, it is closer to the way that Curtis describes it, 'like a still life', with the 'fruits of the field emblematically arranged in her basket.'[14] There is something decidedly artful about this scene, not meant to be taken as an actual occurrence simply reported by the poet. Quite possibly, the girl, and the basket she carries, can be read symbolically. Stan Smith calls her 'apotheosised',[15] as though standing for the simple, beautiful, and generous Ireland that, in an ideal world -if the Irish could escape the nightmare of their history- it could become. The likelihood that the girl is indeed meant to be somewhere between impressionistic and symbolical is given impetus by the next poem in the sequence, 'Sibyl', which sees the entry of a figure who clearly derives from the realm of myth, not the world of the every day.

Sibyl

The second poem, while it may not appear so because of its often dense language, is much less complex than the first poem. The sense of desolation has returned as a theme, but also as a discussion point: 'What will become of us?' the poet asks of the prophetess. She has been drafted in from ancient Rome, but, considering that she uses the possessive 'our', has been ceded Irish identity, later talking about the Irish as 'My people' (perhaps, then, she is truly a 'Roman' Catholic!). The discussion, such as it is, concerns the state of Irish society locked into a bloody struggle. The general tone of seriousness, as though some fearful watershed has

been arrived at, necessitating counsel and consultation with one who is wise, may suggest also the generalizing of the desolation. Perhaps we are supposed to see the killing of the British official as now distant, just one among a number of killings. 'Sibyl', because it is not only part of a sequence but also its own poem, may be taken as expressing ideas on the general state of Ireland at this time. If so, then it is from a sense of general humanistic near-despair at the seemingly endless bloodshed, possibly not just the murder of one high-ranking British official, that Heaney asks his question -that, at least, is one way to understand this next stage in the poetic sequence.

We have already glimpsed the answer in the discussion above, about the 'fouled magma' seeming to represent the spiritually polluted nature of an Ireland enmeshed in conflict. The message is clear and unambiguous: Ireland needs to stop the violence, broker peace and embrace forgiveness on all sides. The imagery employed is striking, even at times bewildering, to the point that it may undermine the message it is attempting to deliver. The suggestion that 'our very form is bound to change' announces one of the most bizarre lines to be found in modern poetry: 'Dogs in a siege. Saurian relapses. Pismires.' Neil Corcoran provides the best gloss on the many references within the Sibyl's proto-Dantean vision, and, rather bravely tackles this line as a 'prophesy of what will happen without such "forgiveness" -the change of human form into a bestial or insectile alternative…'[16] Yet, there is clearly poetic looseness in Heaney's line: to say that people, because of the current bloodshed, might become (actually) bestial or insectile, overly stretches logic and even the fabric of language. The idea of humans being guilty of bestial behaviour is, of course, an old trope, often describing human violent action. Yet, swiftly passing over the canine reference, 'Saurian' is specific, meaning 'lizard-like'; the

specificity is confounding, as is the implication in ‘relapses’, which suggests that humans would not simply become ‘lizard-like’ but would return to their original lizard-like form. Precisely how humans are to be viewed as ‘insectile’, as ‘pismires’ is an archaic word for ants, is also extremely difficult to understand. Ants are well known, not for violence, but for teamwork. This line, therefore, presents something of an impossible challenge to the reader, and is, I believe, evidence of an over-reaching, and an over-stretching, of language. It seems here that Heaney is straining to summon up Dantesque imagery in order to prosecute his vision.(17)

Other imagery in the poem feels similarly weak and strained, as with the notion of ‘Bright nymphs’ being *incubated* [italics mine] in ‘fouled magma’, and ‘buds like infants’ fists’ on ‘the helmeted and bleeding tree’. The aggregate image of Irish society at this present time is not designed to flatter. Furthermore, Heaney, ventriloquizing the Sibyl, takes this opportunity to attack other aspects of the society, seeing in it a growing materialism on top of all the spiritually-imperiling violence that it is engaged with:

> My people think money
> And talk weather. Oil rigs lull their future
> On single acquisitive stems.

Very probably Heaney can be praised for his prescience in envisaging a future Celtic Tiger of dishonest individuals obsessed with making money, but, and this is important in terms of the accuracy of his vision, there has never been an oil industry in Ireland. This vision brings in an entirely new problem in terms of thematic focus within the sequence: now it is not merely that the Irish people are in a state of moral, spiritual

and physical disarray because of the political instability of the times, they are also prone to greed, and have become, or will become, in thrall to a menacing technological future (as denoted by 'oil rigs' and 'echo-sounders', both of which in turn denote the industrialized exploitation of nature, no doubt natural enemies of the rural Heaney). It is not a very comforting vision or assessment of Irish society, circa 1979:

> The ground we kept our ear to for so long
> Is flayed or calloused, and its entrails
> Tented by an impious augury.
> Our island is full of comfortless noises.

'Sibyl' is a much less complex poem than 'After a Killing' because it is didactic, not to mention composed without much subtlety, or even accuracy.[18] It appears to echo, although not very successfully, the poetry of Dante and his 'Inferno', with which Heaney was much obsessed himself at this time, evidenced by the 'translation', 'Ugolino', the ending piece of *Field Work*. That poem also contains some grotesque imagery. Perhaps Heaney felt the Troubles might be *his* Inferno.

At the Water's Edge

The third poem in the sequence restores the scene to a recognizable place, an Ireland with place names and marks of civilization past and present. The geographical area is more focused than it was in the first poem, with the poet now island hopping in Lough Erne, in the county of Fermanagh, visiting Christian and pre-Christian sites, and being deeply pensive. Why he has chosen Lough Erne is not made clear. Christian religion has not played much part so far in this sequence, with, as we

have just seen, the poet choosing to consult with a very clearly pagan-tradition prophetess, not with a priest. In this third poem, the first stanza describes a sixth century Christian site[19] (on Devenish Island at a southern point in Lower Lough Erne), and in a way which symbolically suggests the erosion of Christianity's function and purpose: 'Carved monastic heads/ Were crumbling like bread on water.' Like the features of the Irish landscape in the first poem, then, institutionalized religion appears unable to provide any comfort, or answer, to contemporary problems. The poet-seeker moves on, to Boa Island, a fairly large island at a northern point of Lower Lough Erne. The pre-Christian statue he finds there is no help either, answering the poet's 'silence with silence.' As Curtis concludes: 'Both early Christian and pagan beliefs are crumbling: they have no direct relevance for present-day Ireland.'[20]

As with the first poem, and the second, it seems the poet is engaged in a journey to look for answers to the seemingly insoluble problem of Ireland's Troubles. Of course, the whole business of seeking answers to questions is dependent upon what kind of question you ask, and to whom you put the question. The first question that the poet asked -'Who's sorry for our trouble?'-, as I have suggested, appears to ignore the breadth of the problem. The second question -'What will become of us?'- seems rather generalized, not to mention desperate, as though we are destined to some awful eventuality -that is how the question is usually meant in common usage. Neither question rises to meet the complexity of the problem, which involves, among other things, a violent struggle which has origins stretching back almost a millennium. Furthermore, while the poet finds little of comfort in ancient monastic wisdom, as embodied in the statues he visits on Devenish island, leading the reader to the conclusion that institutionalized religion has little to offer, one wonders what sort of answer the poet might find if he

asked someone like Father Edward Daly. Preceding Heaney by a few years, Daly attended the same school as Heaney, St Columb's College in Derry, and had firsthand experience of Bloody Sunday. One of the most enduring images of that day is of Father Daly holding up a white handkerchief as he lead people carrying the injured and dying to safety in the midst of the shooting. Daly, who became Bishop of Derry in 1974, thereby qualifying him as a spokesman for institutional religion, might answer, like many members of the minority Catholic population in Northern Ireland, that the questions that need to be asked are really much more complex than Heaney's poetic self seems capable of.

It is with this in mind that it is very appropriate, timely, and perhaps something of a relief, that Heaney chooses to end the poem, and the poetic sequence, with an image of what in fact much of this pain and heartache is all about, a people suffering under the injustices of a state-enforced political system. The sound of a helicopter brings the poet back in time to a civil rights march in the early seventies, and his apparent direct involvement therein. By bringing in this new material, which of course has relevance for any questions he may have on the problems besetting them now, Heaney leads the reader (a) out of the seeming fog of emotional trauma evidenced in the first poem, (b) out of the reductive nightmare of spiritual corruption seen in the second poem, and (c), out of the despair at being apparently unable to find answers to anything, seen in this final poem. He brings the reader to a moment of historical importance equal to -and in fact directly inspired by- the civil rights marches led by Martin Luther King and others. What was happening in America provided a model for Northern Irish people who felt disenfranchised and frustrated.

The Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland began as early as 1963, although it wasn't until 1968 that the first marches began. In the

line ‘How we crept before we walked!’, perhaps Heaney referencing MLK’s famous quote: ‘If you can’t fly then run, if you can’t run then walk, if you can’t walk then crawl…’ Or, maybe he is suggesting that it took a certain amount of time before actually embarking on what was always going to be a provocative action, a civil rights march, or that the early days were marked by indecision, or trial and error. Yet, the verb ‘creep’ seems to be an unfortunate choice of word.[21] It may contain a truthful ring to it, reflecting the likely initial stumblings of the movement, but it also has connotations which detract from the sense of bravery and courage involved in the whole process. Heaney was well aware of the force of the word: he uses ‘creep’ in the *Wintering Out* (1972) poem ‘Bog Oak’ to describe the actions of Irish rural people as seen through the patronizing eyes of Edmund Spenser. Furthermore, and somewhat bewilderingly, the whole line is actually an adaptation of a line about himself as poet, from the final piece in his 1975 collection of prose poems entitled *Stations*, reproduced in full below:

Incertus

I went disguised in it, pronouncing it with a soft
Church-latin c, tagging it under my efforts like a damp
fuse. Uncertain.A shy soul fretting and all that.
Expert obeisance.
Oh yes, I crept before I walked. The old pseudonym
lies there like a mouldering tegument.

The exclamatory phrase toward the close of ‘At the Water’s Edge’, then, must surely produce a somewhat mystifying effect on the informed reader, raising the question of precisely who is supposed to be the

subject of this line -the civil rights marchers, or the poet? The poetic strategy at this point seems difficult to comprehend, unless (a) the poet is invoking MLK's words, or (b) invoking his own experience and somehow transferring it to the marchers. In the latter reading, the force of 'crept' concerns not awkwardness, but uncertainty, and uncertainty of a philosophical, poetic nature (as that is how it is meant in 'Incertus'). Perhaps Heaney is reading the marchers through the lens of his own experience. Yet, this is a strategy which necessarily shifts attention from them onto him, which in turn complicates, or even stymies, the sense that this can be taken as public poetry.(22)

However the word 'crept' strikes the reader, it can be seen as alluding to the potentially precarious nature of what the civil rights marchers had embarked upon. This relates then to the emotional aspect involved, and emotion did play a huge part in the proceedings of the particular march to which Heaney seems to be alluding at the end of the poem. The march at Newry took place on Sunday, February 6th, 1972, and was called as a response to Bloody Sunday, which had occurred seven days previous. As it was 'our march', we can assume that Heaney was there, and so we can think of the use of the word 'scared' as reflecting personal experience. (Indeed, in his 2007 memoir *The Pear is Ripe*, John Montague confirms that Heaney was there, as was he, Michael Longley and Thomas Kinsella.(23)) As I heard from a friend who also attended that day, there were false rumours going around, possibly generated by some unsympathetic members of the press, that the IRA was going to use the event as a cover for an attack on the army. This, in turn, created widespread anticipation of some action by the army -which, thankfully, did not materialize- hence the sense of fear captured by Heaney. Yet, while these words may capture some of the reality of the situation, the combined effect of 'crept' and 'scared' might

also be interpreted as to some extent detracting from the bravery and forthrightness of the marchers. In this sense, one might ask if 'Triptych' is public poetry, or something more personal? Combined with the steal from a poem about himself, it cannot be said with complete satisfaction that here Heaney adequately memorializes the historical importance of the moment and the achievement of the movement.

Another aspect of the ending of the poem is that the triptych may be designedly cyclical.(24) The marchers, like the IRA men on the hill, are involved in the same activity: walking. This is not a trumpeted, highly visible connection, but it is there for the taking -the 'scared, irrevocable steps' of the marchers echoes the IRA men from 'After a Killing', who are depicted thus: 'As if the unquiet founders walked again'. Indeed, there is something about the use of the adjective 'irrevocable' to describe the marchers' steps which feels almost doom-laden (as it often is in common usage), as though, in fact, the word were describing the prosecution of an action as morally heavy as the undertaking of violent action for an ideological cause. This brings us back to the description of the IRA men in the first stanza of the first poem. Description of them as 'two young men' could equally apply to 'two young men' on a protest march. Heaney does not make any explicit link, of course, but what appears to be an available interpretation is that the IRA overseers also took 'scared, irrevocable steps' when they undertook to engage in a campaign of violence against British rule in Ireland. This does not necessarily imply that the civil rights marchers are equivalent with those who would take up arms, rather that there is a parallel to be drawn, however distant. Perhaps Heaney is implying, as his ambivalence resurfaces, that the 'two young men', were also likely 'unquiet' in the sense of morally agonized, and unwilling to undertake violence, and that they felt forced into it by the apparent impossibility

of the circumstances. At any rate, it appears there are a number of responses to be taken in regard to the political and historical mess inherent in the creation of and maintenance of Northern Ireland, three of which are: (a) take up arms (b) protest peacefully (c) write poems which seek to make sense of the situation.

Other aspects of the final poem require some elucidation also. Although, as stated, the geographical focus is limited and identifiable, unlike in the previous two poems, a number of questions rise to the surface. Firstly, one wonders precisely why the three islands mentioned are all located in Lough Erne in County Fermanagh, the most south-western county among the six which comprise Northern Ireland. There is no apparent link to Heaney, as he hails from the Castledawson area in the county of Derry, close to Lough Beg or Lough Neagh. Yet Heaney gets around in his poetic travels. 'At the Water's Edge' anticipates *Station Island* (1984) (which is set on Lough Derg) as contained in the image of the poet experiencing the isolation of an island and also experiencing penitential or outlook-changing emotions. If so, Lough Erne, with its multiple islands -over one hundred and fifty, in fact- provides a dramatic backdrop to the image of the searching poet, with an ancient Christian site on one island, and an older pagan site on another. Certainly, 'At the Water's Edge' possesses a special atmosphere due to these islands, and to the fact that some bear the remains of ancient civilizations. It might also be noted that the poem itself contains vastly more verbs than the other two ('heard', 'watched', 'listened', 'remembered', 'wanted' etc..), as we see the poet indulge in greater and greater efforts to discover answers to his quest.

Devenish and Boa are well known. Horse Island, the last place he visits, much less so. There are a few Horse Islands in Ireland, and actually two on Lough Erne, but neither of them are well visited sites.

It would appear that Heaney is referring to the larger of the two, located near Killadeas. There is one habitation, I am told, which has since fallen into disuse, yet that would fit with the house in the poem, with its 'cold hearthstone' and 'open window'. The island is now a protected area, mostly a bird sanctuary run by the RSPB. It is not open to the public, and not easily accessible. Beyond the lyric beauty of the island's name, one wonders why Heaney chose such a desolate spot, and, half-jokingly, was he even trespassing?[(25)] I have also done a little field-work of my own, checking the location and mainland environs of Horse Island on Google Maps [accessed November 19, 2014]. A prominent building nearby on the mainland is the nineteenth century Priory Church, which is Church of Ireland, and on the opposite side of the road there is a detached building, possibly a community hall, on which is draped a British Union Jack. This seems to suggest that the area, Killadeas, is Protestant and Loyalist-leaning. This problematizes the sense encountered in the poem, as the reader might wonder not only why the poet is there but why a British helicopter is circling above this quiet rural, picturesque and predominantly Protestant backwater.

There are other resonances which may or may not pertain. What, if anything, is the reader to make of the poet hearing 'a snipe', a small bird belonging to the wader family, in the opening stanza of the final poem: is it a linguistically playful echo of the 'young men with rifles', who may be 'snipers'? Well, strangely enough, it may be, if the reader recalls the play between 'snipe' and 'sniper' in the poem 'The Backward Look' from *Wintering Out*. In that heavily allegorical poem, about the fate of the Irish language, we are asked to imagine the 'snipe' as the Irish language, escaping 'the sniper's eyrie', which presumably connotes escaping the danger of becoming a dead language. That particular meaning is likely not relevant here, but considering the *Wintering Out*

poem, it is tantalizing to imagine that Heaney's snipe on Devenish is designedly resonant with the image of the apparent snipers from the first poem. As to what the purpose or effect such an echoing is supposed to have is entirely open to interpretation.

However, this possible allusion in turn uncovers the likelihood of another. The word 'sniper' originates with the activity of hunting snipe as game in 1773 among British officers in India, getting its first figurative use in 1892.[26] Hence it is possible to read into the appearance of a snipe on Devenish some echo of the supposed 'snipers' in the first poem. The resonances play not only within 'Triptych' but, upon reflection, with a much earlier poem, from *Death of a Naturalist*. 'Dawn Shoot' tells the tale of the boy poet and his friend on a pre-dawn hunt among the fields and the hedges of rural Derry. Guns in hand, they are looking not for snipe, although they see quite a few of them, fluttering up and upsetting their plans, but rabbits. What is particularly interesting about this is that 'After a Killing' can be read as a serious re-enactment, and re-imagining, of their activity. The boys' behaviour, and even their attire, is modelled on the military:

> Rubber-booted, belted, tense as two parachutists,
> We climbed the iron gate and dropped
> Into the meadow's six acres of broom, gorse and dew.

Furthermore, their sense of excitement as they anticipate their first kill is palpable:

> Snug on our bellies behind a rise of dead whins,
> Our ravenous eyes getting used to the greyness,
> We settled, soon had the holes under cover.

In some distant sense, these two young boys pre-figure the 'Two young men with rifles on the hill', who were also no doubt on their bellies for some time, and were also prey to the cold and the wet of the Irish countryside, but sharing the sense, perhaps, that such conditions are more 'bracing' than anything else. Heaney's friend Donnelly (not Heaney, future poet and pacifist) shoots and kill a rabbit, but they leave the body where it is. The scene after this killing might almost have been describing the scene after a killing by the IRA, after it had been cleared of booby-traps[27]:

> The ones that slipped back when the all clear got round
> Would be the first to examine him.

Another echo in the final poem of the three concerns the pre-Christian statue the poet sees on Boa island: being 'two-faced' it recalls the line from 'Sibyl', 'My people think money/ And talk weather.' The imputation of deceitfulness concerning the statue, however, may be misleading. Janus was the ancient Roman god of beginnings and transitions, having two faces because one looked to the past and one to the future. That 'two-faced' now means deceitful is due to semantic corruption over time. Indeed, this statue may be related to another, completely different tradition of ancient art because it is not simply two-faced, but actually a statue of two full length bodies standing back to back. One is male and the other female. What such a statue might signify is really one for the archaeologists, but it is unlikely that ancient people spent time and effort to create an artefact symbolizing deceitfulness; likely it has more to do with enshrining the importance of fertility and harmony between male and female, or some other concept which they valued. Necessarily, the statues in the Caldragh graveyard

on Boa are quite mysterious in origin, as they were 'probably carved in the Iron Age' so the poet's assumptions are speculative at best.(28) We cannot know that the groove in the figure represents trepanning, for example, and the idea of the 'sex-mouthed stone' possibly derives from popular interpretation, based on other features, which has since been questioned: 'What was once interpreted as a phallus now looks like a narrow band extending downwards to the base of what was once a larger idol.'(29) And, lastly, whether they represent some kind of 'Anathema' or not is unknown. 'Anathema to what?' the reader may ask. Yet, 'anathema' harks back to 'impious' in the second poem, and, neatly, 'profane' in the first, providing a kind of notional linkage throughout the sequence, albeit not easily deciphered. Furthermore, and maybe more thematically interesting, is the fact of the binary nature of the statue in question: it encompasses two separate entities, an idea which resonates with the poet's ambivalence toward political violence. Just as the poet can describe the activity of the IRA overseers as both 'profane and bracing', this ancient artefact accommodates the concept of two within one -maybe it can be read as a symbol of the poet's deeply ambivalent self.

Conclusion

So, at the end of this journey, at the end of 'Triptych', what can the reader come away with? Well, there are many aspects to these poems which are rich, for example in terms of cultural and historical references. Heaney takes the reader on a kind of journey through Ireland, with plenty of time for a close-up focus on details in a variety of areas. The poems offer a visual feast, as is to be supposed within a poem by Seamus Heaney, as the poet's eye roams and falls upon a number of images which conjure at least aspects of rural, if not urban, Ireland.

The poem is also clearly a genuine attempt to express both feelings and ideas on what was, at the height of the Troubles, a seemingly intractable problem. The overriding after-impression of the poem may be one of abiding deep concern, as the reader may feel that he or she has been made aware of the seriousness of the matter at hand. There is no doubting the earnestness of the poet; the matter of this poetic sequence is clearly profoundly affecting. There is also much art in the manner in which he presents each stage of his journey, his quest for answers, as the reader is challenged to take active part in the poetic process and fill in the rationale behind, for example, the sudden shift of scene at the end of the first poem, and the island-hopping in the last. The poem creates its own logic, and its own rationale, and its own manner of communication, to which the reader must be sensitive, receptive, and, to a degree, creative, too. The cyclicality of the sequence, as mentioned above, also makes for a fascinating parallelism between two different responses to the Irish problem. It is a poetic sequence rich in echoes and resonances of its own building blocks, and beyond.(30) In the midst of all this, of course, the poet's ambivalence creates a tension between everything we think we might guess about his attitude, and everything we simply cannot be sure about.

Yet, there are also areas and choices within the poetic sequence which, as the foregoing study may or may not have made clear, feel strained, and may be termed as loose. Certainly, such areas within the poems which appear to cause problems of interpretation remain open for study and further debate. The poem carries on as an artefact of one poet's best effort to capture a particular moment in both his life and the life of his country. The extent to which the resulting poems achieve what the poet set out to do may have implications for his other poetic enterprises, but I have limited myself only to these poems, bringing

in only as much material as I felt I needed to in order to help with the elucidation of the text. In doing so, I feel I have done justice to his text, but the result, of course, is very much a warts-and-all portrait, as they say. In some sense, 'Triptych' feels like a work in progress, wherein the tone fluctuates, or sometimes simply confounds. It seems to be clearly public in tone overall, in the delivery of the message that conflict is a cause for sorrow, and more, but, as I believe I have illustrated in regard to word choice, it falters somewhat in relating the story of people standing up for their rights.

Heaney's approach to the political complexities of the Northern Ireland situation seems to me to be inadequate, and also not entirely coherent. While strong emotions are certainly part of the equation, here feelings -and primarily feelings of almost crushing desolation and pessimism- predominate over ideas. At times, it is difficult to see how any constructive ideas at all can emerge from the stygian gloom. The second poem, 'Sibyl' has little to offer except a crude caricature of Irish society, and the writing of it also seems to me to be crude, being a rather weak imitation of Dante. Within the triptych, it unfortunately commands the central panel, but lacks the depth and the complexity of its companion pieces, its side-panels. Furthermore, I am not sure how to account for the severity with which Heaney appears to be castigating the society he is a part of.

Concerning this, the poetic sequence does show another side to the Seamus Heaney who was admired by many of the members of his own community for drawing attention to the difficulties being suffered on a daily basis by the Catholic minority, for articulating historical injustices, and for exposing entrenched attitudes, and then making all of that into an art which made people sit up and take notice. Yet, Heaney was never satisfied with himself, or with his political expression, which, he likely

feared, might destroy his poetry. He even grew suspicious of his own output, for example refusing to read out 'Requiem for the Croppies', from *Door into the Dark* (1969), during the seventies as he felt it could be used as propaganda for IRA recruitment. It was obviously public poetry, and it delivered a simple message of solidarity; yet, in the midst of all the killing, Heaney became uncomfortable. It is the younger Seamus Heaney, then, who wrote poems that brought readers, often very vividly, into the Catholic republican-leaning ethos he grew up in. In 'Docker' from *Death of a Naturalist* and 'The Other Side' from *Wintering Out*, the political and cultural proclivities he has inherited are startlingly clear.(31) In his *Stations*, which is now very difficult to get hold of, we see the Heaney who grew up, as many did, amid political and sectarian division, where nothing is 'neuter'. In pieces like 'Sweet William', 'Kernes', and 'July', for example, the reader is given a glimpse of the shaping influences of the community, for better or for worse. They certainly provide vivid insight into how he saw the world and society when he was growing up, and how he viewed the 'other side'. Heaney's selection of pieces from that slim volume for his *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* suggests that, as with 'Requiem for the Croppies', some kind of self-censorship of politically sensitive material was in operation.(32)

Heaney evolved, if that is the best way to say it, into a poet who became wary of expressing a strong political opinion in his poems. In 'Triptych', we get a very generalized humanistic Heaney, who deplores violence per se, and is prepared to go on his hands and knees to ask for forgiveness, even from the British, on the understanding that one man's life is sacred and that is reason enough to mourn, or express regret. Heaney's tone of sternness and/or desolation derives from the fact that he himself feels as culpable as the two young men on the hill. The poem

following 'Triptych', 'The Toome Road', draws a parallel between the British army and the Imperial Roman army: 'O charioteers, above your dormant guns'. In doing so, Heaney 'registers a sense of bitterness at the continuing presence of British troops in Northern Ireland.'(33) It may be Heaney's way of tipping the balance back a little toward the other way of seeing things in Northern Ireland at the height of the Troubles.(34) It may be Heaney returning to the outlook of his younger self, in which he educated the largely British readers of *The Listener*, or those tuned into the BBC, about some of the indignities and discomforts being suffered by the minority population of the British state of Northern Ireland.(35) Of course, the Toome Road is indeed geographically very close to the Mossbawn home of his childhood, so this poem is a kind of return. Perhaps 'Triptych' is the work of a person who has seen and lived all those indignities, but who has also seen and lived through seemingly endless years of terrible bloodshed -perpetrated on all sides, it should be said. Perhaps the author of 'Triptych' had simply grown sick and tired of all the killing. That being so, of course, it would be an entirely understandable position for any decent man to find himself in.

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Notes:-

(1) See O'Driscoll (2008), p. 211. Ewart-Biggs was killed in his car by a landmine, along with a Northern Ireland Office official. He had been Ambassador for less than two weeks.

(2) Ibid. Heaney later became the first presenter of The Ewart-Biggs Prize,

created with the aim of fostering Anglo-Irish understanding.

(3) A short video chronicling the story is available on YouTube, featuring Cosgrave saying these words: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPbqfqZn2RI

(4) Corcoran (1998), p. 88.

(5) Murphy (2010), p.58

(6) Ibid.

(7) Ibid, p.59.

(8) As Corcoran (1998) points out, p. 90, this phrase is a variation on a line from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

(9) Curtis (2001), p.107.

(10) In 1979, the year of publication of *Field Work*, the IRA assassinated a member of the Royal Family, Lord Mountbatten, as he holidayed in Ireland. On the same day, August 27, the IRA also killed eighteen British soldiers, in what is called the 'Warrenpoint Massacre'. Soldiers who went to the assistance of those who had suffered a bomb attack were caught in a second deliberate bombing.

(11) Hart (1989), p.220, finds something very similar in the poem 'Toome' from *Wintering Out*. In the four four-lined stanza poem, the poet finds himself in muddy ditches, uncovering objects from a long-gone past, like 'fragmented ware' and 'musket-balls'. 'For him the most fecund ditch of all is the "alluvial mud" that betokens a time before all human habitation and slaughter.'

(12) Curtis (2001), p 107: 'It is impossible to be "neuter" in contemporary Ireland; the division into Catholic or Protestant sects is absolute and ubiquitous.'

(13) Ibid.

(14) Curtis (2001), p.107.

(15) Andrews (1998), p.66.

(16) Corcoran (1998), pp. 89-90. See also Curtis (2001), p.108, for his gloss on 'Dogs in a siege' as 'sectarian dog fights'.

(17) Hufstader (1999) mentions Heaney's 'Dantesque imagery', p 55.

(18) Ibid, Hufstader's phrase 'a woman "prophesying" in abstract, moral terms about northern mores' suggests that her function is didactic.

(19) A monastery established in the sixth century by St Molaise. There is also a

prominent and well-preserved Round Tower, and various ruins.

(20) Curtis (2001), p. 109.

(21) Murphy (2010), p 59, also appears a little confounded by the use of this word.

(22) Cavanagh (2009) quotes the poet, p.126:'After "Triptych", which Heaney thinks *was* public, "I suppose the [rest of the] elegies are public, in a way, although the quick of those is quite, quite private."' Heaney seems unsure of precisely how to categorize even the elegies.

(23) Montague (2007), p 228. In O'Driscoll (2008), p 119, however, Heaney appears to deny ever having been active in any way with the civil rights movement. 'I was all in favour of the Civil Rights people, but I've never been actively involved in politics.'

(24) Murphy (2010), p.59: '… we might ask ourselves, again, whether the defiance of the protest march is continuous with the "bracing" defiance of the gunmen with whom Heaney opens the poem.'

(25) Excerpt from an email from Brad Robson, Fermanagh Area Manager of the Fermanagh Reserves RSPB, November 13, 2014: 'Approx 53 acres. Irish grid reference H197516. This large island has a ruin of a dwelling house in the northeast near the shore. The small two-story house had an intact roof until a few years ago but that has since broken and is in danger of collapse. I do not know for certain, but the house is likely to have been occupied until at least the 1930s and possibly the 1950s. The staircase has collapsed but there was some ironwork in the fireplace a few years back. This island was compulsorily purchased by the department of Environment in the 1990s from the Armstrong family and has been managed by RSPB ever since. It is one of the most important sites left in Northern Ireland for breeding wading birds and has been designated as an Area of Special Scientific Interest.'

(26) http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=snipe [accessed Nov 13, 2014]

(27) Bodies were sometimes booby-trapped, so it became standard practice to check first, and then call the 'all clear' for the ambulance men etc.. See endnote 10.

(28) Lalor (2003), p. 99-100.

(29) Ibid.

(30) One not yet mentioned concerns the way that 'stoup for rain water' prefigures the 'cracked jug full of cobwebs', wherein an object's original purpose is usurped or supplanted, at least as a symbol of entropy and/or as a symbol of the subversion of original valid intentions (the founding of the Irish state, perhaps) by excessive recourse to violence. Or, is that reading too much into it?

(31) See more concerning this, in my earlier paper on Heaney, online at: http://library.tsurumi-u.ac.jp/metadb/up/admin/48_2_02_connolly.pdf

(32) Hufstader (1999), p. 29: 'Heaney's choices from *Stations* for the *Selected Poems* [*Opened Ground*] give the impression that the prose poems chronicle the writer's evolution up and away from the anti-Protestant and anti-British provincial mentality which nurtured him. We read of the tribally ignorant family in wartime gathered around the wireless to hear and applaud Lord Haw Haw's broadcasts, and of his father's awkward attempts to make friends with a demobbed Protestant soldier. Missing are poems about the sharper impressions which Protestant culture makes on the young man: the seductiveness he finds in unionist culture, his fear of fighting with Protestant boys, and his fear, as a young adult, of being surrounded by Protestants in the men's room of a pub.'

(33) Murphy (2010), p 57.

(34) This is how it appeared to strike Dennis O'Driscoll (2008), p 211, although it is denied by Heaney.

(35) I'm thinking of the first few essays in *Preoccuptaions*, in particular his essay 'Christmas, 1971', first published in *The Listener*, when he says, on p.32: 'For some people in this community, the exercise of goodwill towards the dominant caste has been hampered by the psychological hoops they have been made to jump and by the actual circumstances of their lives within the state, British and all as it may have been.'Etcetera.